

Localisation of e-learning

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An Epic Insight

The aim of localisation is not only to translate and adapt the software and content from the source language, it is also to rebuild, test and fix the localised product to ensure it appears as if originally written in the target language(s).

This can be an onerous and expensive exercise, fraught with difficulties, unless the decision to localise is taken early in the development process. This ensures that the design activity takes into account localisation issues and requirements, and avoids the feeling that localisation is simply a 'bolt on' to the original project, put together in a piecemeal fashion, shoe-horned into a design that doesn't fit.

Design to localise

Ideally, e-learning should be designed with the four dimensions of culture, learning, translation and technical adaptation in mind. Applying some simple rules and avoiding language-specific and culture-specific content in the source product will save huge amounts of effort. Of course, this isn't always possible, as the content might have already been built in the source language.

However, if you know that the e-learning is to be translated, the following points should be taken into account. It is easier to avoid tricky translation and cultural adaptation problems than to work round them. Prevention is better than cure.

Text

There are some simple rules when writing text for e-learning programmes that will require translation:

- Use plain, clear English: this will make translation easier
- Minimise text on screen, leaving plenty of room for 'long' languages such as German
- Icons might be better than words, but beware of cultural differences for those
- Longer words and phrases might not fit on menus, dialogue boxes, etc.
- Watch out for too much text displayed as graphics as this will require costly rework
- Specially created fonts or scribbled graphic styles will give you more work
- Avoid language-dependent material e.g. B stands for Bird (it doesn't in French) and avoid mnemonics (e.g. SMART objectives) as they don't translate
- Be aware that acronyms (e.g. TPM or TQM) might change

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Graphics

Document your font along with its size. With layered graphics, all text elements will exist in a separate layer or layers from the other graphic elements, so the text can be replaced in the graphic without affecting the original image. Make sure there are clean backgrounds for all graphics with text unless it's a plain background.

Graphics without text need not be touched. Textual replacements normally use the same font (although not necessarily) and placement of text on the graphic wherever possible, although this is obviously affected by the length of the text.

Be aware of the possible need for hot spots and highlights to get bigger (or smaller) due to word lengths varying from one language to another, as this could necessitate code changes.

Audio, video and animation

Quality audio, video and animation are expensive to produce, especially if it involves talking heads and/or acted scenes. The costs of subtitling or lip-synching can be considerable. You will have to:

- Apply the same rules to audio as outlined in the text section above
- Think carefully about animation with embedded text as this will have to be redone
- Animation synched to narration will be difficult, time-consuming and costly
- Lip-synched audio in video will have to be redone

Code

Language dependent code might need to be changed, for example, matching strings to answers and numbers in code. So be careful in coding functionality that needs considerable changes to code. The positioning of input fields might also have to be planned with localisation in mind i.e not in the middle of sentences, as it is expensive to change their position for each language.

Try to avoid concatenation ('stitching') whenever possible as this traditionally causes considerable problems in other languages due to different grammatical sentence compositions and various articles (in English, there is only "the", whereas in German, for instance, there is "der, die, das, etc.>").

Language issues

European (Roman alphabet) languages in general do not pose any particular difficulties in addition to those already highlighted, and as such are relatively straightforward and cost effective in terms of localisation. However, non-Roman languages bring with them greater difficulties.

For instance, to work properly with Arabic on a PC, you need a special version of Windows, available from the Microsoft website. If done as an upgrade it works out much more cost effective.

Arabic Windows can be run in one of two modes: 'enabled' or 'localised'. 'Enabled' means you can create files in Arabic but the user interface (commands, system messages, etc.) remains in the language you use normally. 'Localised' displays almost everything, including the user interface, in Arabic. You must choose

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one or the other at the time of installation. If you intend to study Thai, Vietnamese, Burmese, Lao, or Khmer you need to have a font (or two) for that language installed on your machine.

For Windows, these are True Type Fonts and so can be used in any word processing program. If you choose to do so, you might need to turn off spell-checking, auto-corrections, 'smart quotes' and the like to be able to type all the characters correctly in these applications.

Character-based languages

KCCJ is the common abbreviation for the Asian languages Korean, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese and Japanese. An alternative is CJK, (Chinese, Japanese and Korean) or C2JK when referring to both Simplified and Traditional Chinese.

Far Eastern languages might look very similar to each other to non-speakers but there is a huge linguistic range. Most, however, are 'tone' languages i.e the same words pronounced with different tones have very different meanings. So be careful with low quality, low sample rate audio – when tone and inflection are meaningful, the pitch and quality of the audio become of extra importance.

Chinese: There are two major spoken forms - Mandarin and Cantonese. This means that an e-learning course can keep the same graphics but might need two different audio versions.

Japanese is complex and you need to decide on using one or other (or a combination) of the following:

- Kanji
- Hiragana
- Katakana

Kanji is more complex and therefore more expensive to translate and produce.

Following these simple, yet key processes will help you avoid some of the major issues and pitfalls that have dogged numerous efforts at localisation. If you'd like a more detailed exploration, then please visit www.epic.co.uk and download our Localisation White Paper.

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